

# The Blood of Christ

The letter to the Hebrews states that

it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins... it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (10:4.10)

The Christian doctrine of salvation rests on the understanding that the death of Christ is the cause of our salvation in some way. This is generally referred as the doctrine of the atonement. It is however, fraught with problems. Paul refers to an earlier tradition saying that "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures."<sup>1</sup> But how is it possible that the death of Christ causes our sins to be forgiven?

The idea of 'Christ dying for us' is closely tied up with the idea of sacrifice, therefore in our search to understand this doctrine we must first be clear on the notion of sacrifice. As before, there are two major 'channels' of thought which 'flow into' the New Testament, the Old Testament and the Hellenistic, and so we must get to grips with these first.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT

### Sacrifice

Sacrifice was, of course, a common practice for the Israelites and still continued at the time of the Christ. However it is important to distinguish several types of sacrifice in the OT. Sacrifice served several purposes. The 'earliest' sacrifice recorded is that of Cain and Abel. Here we have a simple 'offering of the first fruits'. The theological purpose here is not to appease an angry god, nor yet to persuade God to do anything. Rather it is a recognition that all we have comes from God. In later texts this is seen as the recognition that the promised land was God's gift:

The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me. (Dt: 26:8-10a)

There is also a darker side to sacrifice which is condemned in the Old Testament, and that is the sort of sacrifice which is supposed to somehow 'twist God's arm'. It was doubly condemned in that it sometimes involved child sacrifice. This is the meaning of 1 Kings 16:34:

In his days Hiel of Bethel built Jericho; he laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the LORD, which he spoke by Joshua son of Nun.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 15:3b

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Josh 6:26. It seems it was a Canaanite practice for a ruler to sacrifice a child in order to secure the foundations of a city or fortress. The story of Abraham and Isaac is in a way a condemnation of child sacrifice.

### **Covenant Sacrifice**

New Testament phrases such as Luke 22:20 “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” and 1 Corinthians 5:7 “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.” make reference to covenant sacrifice in the Old Testament - the means by which an agreement is sealed between God and humanity. The Passover itself is a covenant sacrifice, but there are earlier examples, perhaps the most curious (and probably ancient) being Gen 15 8-21. The use of blood to ‘seal’ the covenant sacrifice is found in many places, notably in Exodus 24:8:

Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, ‘See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.’

### **Sin, Punishment and Atonement**

There are three basic notions which, in ascending order of gravity, are: *hatat* (missing the mark) which can be accidental, *awon* (trespass, sin) which always involves the guilty party's consciousness and *pasha* (rebellion).<sup>3</sup>

For the Hebrew “every department of life found its equilibrium which was regulated by the cult” and hence “all sin was an offence against the sacral order. It was therefore always a monstrous act” and the individual was “so embedded in the community that it affected the whole community before God imperilling the cult” so “order was restored by either the execution or the excommunication of the offender”<sup>4</sup>

To understand this we need to note that sin and punishment were much more closely linked in the Hebrew understanding. Through sin “an evil had been set in motion which, sooner or later, would inevitably turn against the sinner or the community to which he belonged”<sup>5</sup>

Indeed there are not separate terms for sin and punishment. Both *hatat* and *awon* can be used interchangeably as sin or punishment. For the community to exercise the punishment was more a kind of ‘short circuiting’ the inevitable cycle of ‘evil act - evil effect’ so that it did not undermine the community as a whole.

However, there remained the vexed question of the ‘guiltless sinner’ someone who transgresses the law through folly or ignorance rather than out of malice. And there was also the problem of crimes for which no culprit is found. What is to be done with the ‘evil’ that emanates from these? It is here that the idea of atoning sacrifice comes in. Somehow, through the death of an animal the ‘evil’ comes to its conclusion.

This is perhaps best illustrated with the regulations concerning an unsolved innocent death in Dt 21:1-9, where a heifer is sacrificed so that the Israelites

shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from your midst, because you must do what is right in the sight of the LORD. (v.9)

How this ‘works’ is not made clear. The nearest we can come is in Lev 17:11:

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<sup>3</sup>tafj, /wu and u?p. The following notes come mainly from G. VON RAD *Old Testament Theology* Vol. 1 (SCM, London, 1975) pp. 262-272

<sup>4</sup>VON RAD *op. cit.* p. 264

<sup>5</sup>*ibid.* p. 265

For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement.

Precisely the same blood for which any other use is forbidden in Gen 9:1-9

Note that in these cases it is not a matter of averting the punishment of YHWH, for although the fact that sin and punishment are linked is attributable to the order of the world created by YHWH, nevertheless in all these things it is YHWH who enacts the expiation (at the request of the priests) and the Israelites who receive it. So expiation is not so much a penalty as a saving event, and this is clear in the great Day of Atonement (Lev 16). YHWH removes the baneful influence of an act.

The cultic regulations, of course, refer to the externals of the acts, but this does not mean that internal disposition is irrelevant, as is seen in the prophets.

## ATONING DEATH

### Isaiah 53

The above gives an insight into the idea of sacrifice, which may be a help in understanding similar language applied to Christ, but what of the idea of an atoning death of a human being? One passage which famously uses this image is Isaiah 53 in which the ‘suffering servant’

<sup>5</sup> was wounded for our transgressions (*pasha*), crushed for our iniquities (*awon*); upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. <sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity (*awon*) of us all.... <sup>8</sup> By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression (*pasha*) of my people... <sup>10</sup> Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, (*asham*<sup>6</sup>) he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper. <sup>11</sup> Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. (*awon*) <sup>12</sup> Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors (*pasha*); yet he bore the sin (*hata*) of many, and made intercession for the transgressors (*pasha*).

It is difficult to make a great deal of sense of this passage, at least in the context of the Old Testament, for it runs contrary to many basic OT ideas, as Hengel points out.<sup>7</sup> Ex 32:30-33, in which God refuses Moses offer of himself in atonement for the people, seems to explicitly rule out the idea of atoning death in the terms expressed in Isaiah:

<sup>30</sup> Moses said to the people, “You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” <sup>31</sup> So Moses returned to the LORD and said, “Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. <sup>32</sup> But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot

<sup>6</sup>Technical term for a sin offering - deriving from the verb meaning 'to become guilty'

<sup>7</sup>M. HENGEL *The Atonement* (SCM, London, 1981) p. 8. This book forms the basis of much of the rest of this topic. Incidentally, Hengel's books form an object lesson in constructing an argument in terms of economy, clarity, and breadth of material covered.

me out of the book that you have written.”<sup>33</sup> But the LORD said to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book”

Death in the Old Testament is almost always an evil, and so the idea of atoning death is basically foreign to it.

### Later Jewish Literature

There is recognition in later Jewish literature of the value of dying for ones principles. There is evidence of it in Scripture in the book of Daniel, but it is seen more clearly in the books of the Maccabees:

Now, my children, show zeal for the law, and give your lives for the covenant of our ancestors. (2:50)

Later authors, such as Josephus also speak of the value of martyrdom,<sup>8</sup> but the ideas here are getting very close to parallel ideas in the Hellenistic and Roman world, to which we will shortly turn.

But even if these texts allow for dying for (above all) the Law, they do not speak of atonement. So where did the NT idea come from - is it only Isaiah 53 or are there other sources for the ideas?

### Greek and Roman Ideas

The idea of dying for city or friends was accepted in Greek philosophy - Aristotle, among others, recommends dying for friends in the *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>9</sup> and it seems as if Paul is in dialogue with this in Rom 5:6-8.

More abstract than this is the idea of dying for law and/or truth. Plato has Socrates saying that he will not yield to anyone through fear of death - an idea that emerges in the books of the Maccabees - and Socrates thus goes to his death.

There is also the idea of atoning sacrifice. Firstly in the sense of human sacrifice which, though frowned on in principle, was part of Greek mythology<sup>10</sup> and was available *in extremis* to appease the gods. These are generally voluntary sacrifices - in mythology the victim chooses his or fate in the knowledge (usually gained from the Delphi) that it will bring benefits to others.

Among Roman generals there was the practice of *devotio* - if a battle was going badly the general would throw himself into the midst of the enemy as a sacrifice in the hopes that this might turn the tide. Hengel remarks:

Conceptions universal in antiquity, widespread and going back to the earliest period, underlie these sagas of atoning sacrifices which seem to us to be so cruel. Historical and psychological explanations of them can no longer bring us complete satisfaction. The depth of the crisis brought about by guilt and destiny is matched by the magnitude of the demand for unconditional sacrifice. At its deepest level, doom and sin were related. The voluntary nature of such sacrifice, stressed from the time of Euripedes on, gave it ultimate moral stature and made it a model for citizens.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Cf. HENGEL *op. cit.* p. 8f

<sup>9</sup>Cf. HENGEL *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup>The plays of Euripedes contain several examples, cf. HENGEL *op. cit.* p. 20f

<sup>11</sup> *op. cit.* p. 23

## VIOLENCE AND THE SACRED

René Girard wrote a book entitled *Violence and the Sacred* (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1977, ET of *la violence et le sacré* Editions Bernard Grasset, Paris, 1972) which deals with sacrifice as a sociological reality. See also Gil Baille *Violence Unveiled* (Crossroads, New York, 1997).

Girard writes

Sacrifice... can be defined solely in terms of the sacred, without reference to any particular divinity; that is, it can be defined in terms of maleficent violence polarised by the victim and metamorphosed by his death (or expulsion from the community, which amounts to the same thing) into beneficent violence. Although the sacred is “bad” when it is inside the community, it is “good” when it returns to the exterior. The language of pure sacredness retains whatever is most fundamental to myth and religion; it detaches violence from man to make it a separate, impersonal entity, a sort of fluid substance that flows everywhere and impregnates on contact. The concept of contagion is obviously a by-product of this way of envisaging the sacred. As a concept contagion makes empirical sense in many cases, but it is mythic insofar as it ignores the reciprocal aspect of violence; it literally reifies the violence that is active in human relationships by transforming it into a pseudo-substance. Though generally *less* mythic than the language of divinity, the language of pure sacredness is *more* mythic in that it eliminates the final traces of the real victims, thereby concealing the fact that the sacred cannot function without surrogate victims. (258)

According to Girard there is a paradox of similarity and difference in sacrificial victims that mirrors the paradox of goodness and danger (or even evil) in the sacred. Sacrifice is about using violence to control violence by placing violence in a ritual, sacred sphere which is ‘other’, and therefore safe. Girard explicitly does not apply this to the Judeo-Christian tradition (309) but other have, and Baille appears to argue that the Judeo-Christian tradition has the potential to overcome these paradoxes.

## The Earliest Experience of ‘Atonement’

We have seen some background ideas for the metaphors used in the New Testament with respect to the Atonement, but a key question remains. There were many martyrs of one sort or another at the time of Jesus. Why was he different? How did his death come to be seen not as just another among many, but as the atonement for the sins of all humanity?

### EARLY FORMULAE

Hengel, in his book on the atonement,<sup>12</sup> identifies two ‘two membered formulae’ in Paul’s writing which, for various reasons, are probably not composed by Paul but rather are traditional phrases passed on by Paul. One of these is the very familiar formula of 1 Cor 15:3-5:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Atonement* (SCM, London, 1981) pp. 33-75

Paul makes clear that this is something which he himself received. The second formula is from Romans 4:25

[Christ] was handed over for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

This differs in many respects from the previous formula, but it also differs from Paul's usual language by using *egerthe* for resurrection where Paul normally uses *istemi*, and it uses *dia* for 'for' where Paul usually uses *uper*. The *dia* would seem to come from Isaiah 53

All this points to these texts being older than Paul, and therefore would seem to suggest that they date back to the earliest Christian community. But how did this idea, which is at best peripheral to the Old Testament, and an enormous expansion of Greek ideas, come to be so central in the New Testament?

### **A CRUCIFIED MESSIAH?**

One thing to be noted about these two formulae is that they do not simply state the saving effect of Christ's death, they also speak of his resurrection. Many others had died a martyr's death at the time of Christ, and Jesus was not the only one who was claimed to have overcome that fate and in some way or another. As Hengel puts it

In the Judaism of the time there were some authoritative teachers and pious martyrs who were said to have been transported to heaven or taken into the Garden of Eden after their deaths.

However

Not one of these was made Son of Man or Messiah<sup>13</sup>

Indeed it is highly debatable whether there is any 'scope' for the idea of a suffering Messiah in the Old Testament. Indeed the insistence on Christ's death seems almost calculated to cause maximum offence, to state the facts in as stark a way as possible. And what is shocking is not that 'Jesus died' but that 'the Messiah (Christ) died'. Isaiah 53 is the nearest we can get but the figure there is not described as a Messiah. The question remains, then, is the idea of Christ's atoning death basically a Greek import? Or is it rooted directly in the experience of Jesus?

### **ATONEMENT**

The uses of the word 'atonement' is found in Rom 3:25:

God put [Jesus Christ] forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed.

Heb 2:17

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.

And in 1 John

and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (2:2)

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (4:10)

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<sup>13</sup> *op. cit.* p. 49

This is linguistically linked to the texts that refer to temple sacrifice. As is well known, Hebrews contains a contrast between the temple sacrifice and the sacrifice of Christ. And John too is very interested in the temple cult and feasts - In John's Gospel the passion is arranged so that Christ is clearly seen as the slaughtered Passover lamb. However, both these texts are late and so cannot really connect us with the original experience.<sup>14</sup>

The statement from Romans, however, is not so late, and it should be observed that the model of temple sacrifice was not an ideal one for the concept of Christ's saving death, for the temple sacrifice was a repeated event, whereas Christ's death was "once for all" (Heb 7:27)

### **"A NEW COVENANT IN MY BLOOD"**

One Jewish metaphor in the New Testament that is more clearly central is that of the Last Supper. The oldest account is once again found in Paul's writings:

<sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, <sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." <sup>25</sup> In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11:23-25)

The covenant idea is clearly a 'Jewish' one. But perhaps more importantly it seems to be traceable back to Jesus,<sup>15</sup> and therefore is not a theological 'add on' but rather part of the 'foundation experience'. Jesus understood his death to be for 'the many' as in Mark 10:45:

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many

Which Jeremias also attributes directly to Jesus,<sup>16</sup> and which is repeated in Mark's account of the Last Supper:

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. (14:23-24)

This is really a quite unprecedented statement - for in Jewish thinking atonement was not possible for 'the nations' - only for Israel<sup>17</sup>

### **THE RESURRECTION**

It has already been noted that the statements of atonement are linked with the Resurrection. And on Jesus lips this is similarly true - though the emphasis is on the 'coming of the kingdom':

Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God. (Mark 14:25)

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<sup>14</sup> Having said this, HENGEL in a later book *The Johannine Question* (SCM, London 1989) Argues that the author of Fourth Gospel was the beloved disciple, but that this beloved disciple was not 'John the Son of Zebedee' who is promised a martyr's death (Mk 10:38-39) but some other disciple from Jerusalem who has links with the priestly authorities (Jn 18:15-16), perhaps from a priestly family. This would explain his use of temple feasts as a structural principle of his Gospels, and the concentration of the action in Jerusalem.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. JEREMIAS *New Testament Theology* (SCM, London, 1971) pp. 288-292. pp. 286-299 deal with the whole idea of atonement.

<sup>16</sup> *op. cit.* 293f.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. JEREMIAS *op. cit.* p. 291

And it is here that we might make connection with the disciples experience. Perhaps the best person to turn to this for is once again Paul. Paul, it is recorded, experienced the risen Jesus on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9), an experience he identifies with that of the other apostles (1 Cor 9:1, 15:8). For Paul the experience was one of conversion and forgiveness.

This would seem to be true also of the rest of the disciples. Luke records a bunch of frightened people who one moment are hiding in an upper room, another are going out and preaching with power. Mark records the utter failure of the disciples, and yet in chapter 13 shows that later on they themselves will be prepared to face death. John has the poignant scene of Peter's threefold declaration of love in 21:15-17 following his threefold failure in 18:16-18.25-27

Thus there is a powerful – even explosive – experience of forgiveness in the experience of the death and Resurrection of Christ, and an immediate identification of this with his messiahship. So the claim that ‘Christ died for our sins’ is not first and foremost a reflection on the events but a statement of a truth understood at the deepest level of existence.